

Death Train

Jeff Kerr

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THE LITTLE GIRL HAD positioned herself behind her mother so that Miranda didn't have a good view of her. But now and then, her face would pop into view. Miranda would make a silly face and the girl would go back into hiding. Soon it became a game of peek-a-boo. The girl would sneak a quick look before giggling and ducking back into cover.

Miranda detected movement along the tracks. Was the train leaving? No, it was just a man squeezing between one of the boxcars to joining the waiting throng.

The girl disappeared again. "What's your name?" Miranda called out, weariness in her voice.

Instead of answering, the girl buried her face in her mother's back. Her mother swung an arm around and pulled her forward. "Tell her."

"Luz." She buried her face again.

"Well, Luz," said Miranda. "I have something for you."

Luz lifted her face. Such a beautiful child. "What is it?"

"Let me show you." Miranda stuck a hand in a pocket on her backpack and came out with a red hair tie. "Here. Take it."

Luz wrapped a tiny hand around it.

"What do you say?" her mother prompted.

"Thank you."

Luz handed the tie to her mother. The young woman pulled the girl's hair into a ponytail and wrapped the elastic band in place.

"It looks pretty on you," said Miranda.

Luz smiled.

Her mother said, "What's your name?"

"Miranda." She gestured at her traveling companion. "His is Facundo."

Facundo raised a hand. "Hello."

"I'm Pilar."

"What brings you to the Death Train?" Miranda asked, using the term she had heard from other refugees.

Pilar's expression darkened. "Please. Don't call it that."

"The Beast, then."

"I heard a man on TV call it 'the Train of the Unknowns.'"

"You want to be unknown?"

"At least until we're in the U.S."

Miranda sat on a weedy embankment twenty feet from the railroad tracks. She and Facundo had arrived in Arriaga, a small town in southern Mexico, several hours ago. Facundo lay on his back, hands behind his head. Watching him, Miranda envied his ability to relax, a skill that had eluded her so far on their journey. Her heart hadn't stopped pounding since they found the bullet-riddled bodies of her parents and brother in her family's living room. The soldiers had even murdered her dog.

Fearing she would meet the same fate, Miranda fled. Facundo had planned on leaving anyway. You don't stick around when you learn your name is on an army list of suspected rebels. Not in a place like war-torn San Salvador, where each sunrise finds a fresh crop of dead bodies on the street. "I'm coming with you," Miranda had blubbered as they gaped at the carnage in the living room.

He wrapped his arms around her. "I'm so sorry."

They shared their weedy stretch of ground with at least a hundred other desperate people. Mostly men, but a few women like Miranda Young. Knees pulled up, chin resting in the crook of an elbow. Eyes down, unblinking, tearful. Just trying to survive. Some carried duffle bags, but most traveled only with the clothes they wore. All were searching for the same thing, a place to exist without being murdered.

Then there was Pilar, the young mother who had glommed onto them after trudging up to the tracks a half hour ago, a young boy and girl in tow. Miranda couldn't tell who looked more frightened, Pilar or the children. The boy, whose name she didn't know, appeared no older than ten. His younger sister Luz couldn't be much above eight.

"Are you two married?" It was Pilar, fixing Miranda with an impassive stare.

"No, we're just friends." Not just friends, thought Miranda, but best friends, intertwined in a platonic relationship that stretched back years. But why would Pilar need to know that?

Pilar said, "Where are you from?"

"San Salvador."

"We're from Chancuva."

"I never heard of it."

Pilar emitted a sardonic chuckle. "Nobody has. It's small."

"How many people live there?"

"I don't know. Not many."

Miranda grunted and turned away. Chancuva. Just one tiny village among hundreds. She wondered how many others in El Salvador were feeding its citizens to the Beast.

Pilar said, "I didn't want to leave. One day ..." She cleared her throat. "One day, soldiers came. They started arresting people. I don't

know why. They took my husband from the fields.” She looked at her children. “Their father.”

“What happened to him?”

“They wouldn’t tell me. I checked every day. Then one day they posted a list at the town hall. It said, ‘These traitors have paid the price for their crimes.’ Jorge’s name was on it.” She glanced at her son. “I was afraid they’d take Mateo and put him in the army. I heard they were doing that in other towns.”

“But he’s only a child.”

She stroked the boy’s head. “I know.”

During the ensuing silence, Miranda braced herself for the question she knew was coming. Sure enough, Pilar delivered it. “Why did you leave?”

Miranda took a deep breath and steadied herself before she replied. “I lost my family. My brother was with the rebels. I would have been next.” She flicked a hand at Facundo. “Him too.”

“I’m sorry.”

Miranda sighed and looked away, hoping Pilar would take the hint. Too tired to talk, she had no desire to rehash the terrible recent past. She swept her gaze along the train. There were so many cars, mostly boxcars, but a few tank cars farther up. A seemingly endless chain of rolling steel. A train so long she couldn’t see the engine that would pull it.

Miranda eyed the ladder on the nearest car. Two lengths of steel attached to the corrugated siding with thinner crosspieces bolted in place as rungs. All of it caked in flaking rust. Would it hold? And if it did, what would they find on top? Probably more rusting, sunbaked metal. A precarious perch atop a freight train rumbling 600 miles to Mexico City. Beyond that, more trains, more danger, until they made it all the way to Ciudad Juárez, 1600 miles north.

A man shouted from somewhere up the tracks. A distant roar reached them. Metal screeched against metal, and the train lurched forward. Fighting aching muscles, Miranda stood. It was time to go.

2

ALL ALONG THE TRACKS, people popped to their feet. Pilar touched Miranda's arm. "Can you help us get to the top?"

"Of course."

Facundo shot her a look of disapproval. "We'll have trouble enough as it is," he whispered. "She should ask somebody else."

Miranda swallowed hard and repositioned her backpack. He was right. What did she know about hopping freight trains? This was her first time. But she couldn't refuse now. She looked back at the young mother and gestured for her to follow. Another metallic blast rattled her eardrums and the wheels on the cars began turning. The motion brought the crowd surging forward. Reaching the ladder first, Facundo took hold of it and looked back at Miranda. "Hurry."

Pilar and her children crowded in from behind. Miranda picked up the girl and hoisted her onto the ladder. "Go!" she shouted. The girl found a handhold and pulled herself up several rungs before stopping near the top.

By now, the train was creeping forward. Facundo snatched the boy and held him up so he could grab hold of a rung. He did, but then froze. Pilar pushed past Facundo and shoved the boy from behind. "Go! Go!" She leaped onto the ladder and, still shouting, used a hand to prod him again. He began to climb. Seeing him coming, Luz scam-

bled up and out of sight. With Pilar close on his tail, the boy made it to the top and disappeared.

The train picked up speed and Miranda had to break into a jog to keep up. Wrapping her hands around the ladder's side rail, she jumped. Her feet landed on the bottom rung but, as she started to climb, she slipped. Redoubling her grip, she pulled her legs up, and this time secured a foothold.

As the train moved faster and faster, Miranda feared Facundo might be left behind. She hauled herself up a few rungs to make room for him and looked back over her shoulder. Running at a fast jog, he managed to slip his hands around the side rails and hurtle onto the ladder's bottom rung. Looking up, he jerked his head as a signal for her to keep moving.

After reaching the top of the ladder, Miranda swung her legs onto the car's roof. A pang of anxiety shot through her when she saw that the surface was not level. Instead, it sloped down from a midline spine at an angle that, although not steep, filled her with dread.

She caught Pilar looking at her and gave her a thumbs-up sign. Pilar returned it. Mateo's trembling chin belied his attempt at calmness, while Luz's eyes were like saucers and her cheeks glistened with tears. Whispering in the child's ear, her mother pulled her close.

Miranda watched as the train passed a man with two young children looking up at them from the ground. One child was crying. The man ignored the boy as he watched their missed opportunity speed by.

Taking stock of their situation, Miranda saw that their car was sixth from the end. In the other direction, the cars stretched seemingly for miles. There were two engines to pull them. People clustered atop cars for almost the entire length of the train. Miranda shuddered at the sight of the people on the round tank cars, which offered even less secure seating than her box car.

She swung her legs around and slipped off her backpack. Pushing her bottom against the midline beam, she planted the soles of her feet against the roof itself. The metal was uncomfortably hot, but she felt secure, at least as much as possible on top of a moving train.

The train picked up speed. The rooftop rattled, but it was the occasional bounce to one side that unnerved Miranda. A brisk wind massaged one side of her face. Trees and buildings became a blur as they whizzed past. Telling herself that there was no danger, Miranda hung her head and stared at her backpack.

Facundo said, "Look at all those people."

She barely heard him over the wind.

He leaned closer. "There will be a lot more by the time we reach Mexico City."

"How long will it take?"

"Who knows? At least 17 or 18 hours."

He tapped her shoulder and pointed. A man on the next car was walking upright along the length of the roof. Fearful of him falling, Miranda looked away. The countryside flew past. Green fields of corn and beans, dusty crossroads, adobe huts with corrugated metal roofs, fleeting glimpses of rural life in the Mexican state of Chiapas. In the distance, blue hills loomed like the lift of a roller coaster.

Were there mountains on the way to Mexico City? Maybe. Not that it made a difference. They had to get there, no matter what stood in the way. But the thought of steep cliffs, sharp curves, and long drop-offs chilled Miranda to the bone. It was one thing to thrill to such scenery from the comfort of an enclosed passenger train, quite another to experience it with the wind blasting your face while you tried to keep from falling off a sloped boxcar roof.

A child's cry reached Miranda's ears. Luz. Sobbing. Pushing up against her mother. Pilar doing her best to console her. Trying to

reassure her they were safe when all senses said otherwise. The boy, doing his best to put on a brave face. Wiping away an occasional tear.

Miranda fought against her own urge to cry, but grief, fatigue, and fear threatened to overwhelm the effort. She clasped her hands together and squeezed until they turned white. This was madness. They wouldn't make it to Mexico City. Even if they did, they would still have such a long way to go. And if they survived the trip to Juárez and somehow made it across the border, that would only bring a new set of dangers.

A hand massaged her shoulder. Facundo. "Are you okay?" he said. "What?"

He cupped his hands. "I said, are you okay?"

She forced a smile. "I'm fine." But she wasn't fine. She should be at home feeding her dog or arguing with her brother or helping her mother with the dishes. Instead, she sat atop a train hurtling through a foreign landscape on the way to an uncertain future. As the wind whipped her hair and the boxcar roof rattled beneath her, the dam broke, and the tears surged forth.

3

HOW COULD FACUNDO LOOK so relaxed? Lolling on the box-car roof as if sunning himself at the beach. Legs crossed, arms back, blank expression on his face. His body swaying with the rhythm of the train, his mind apparently unconcerned with the prospect of pitching over the side to a gruesome death. Did that ever happen?

He attempted to stretch, but his arms froze, and a small cry escaped his lips.

“What’s the matter?” Miranda asked.

He frowned. “Hurt my shoulder lifting the boy.”

“Is it bad?”

“I’ll live.”

Was he blaming her?

“How much water do you have left?” he asked.

“A liter.”

“Me too. I hope that’s enough.”

The train slowed as they entered a more populated area. Rural huts gave way to more substantial buildings of brick and steel. Lines of idling automobiles waited at the crossings. Pedestrians hurried along streets crammed with stores and houses. They passed a block of low-slung apartments and pulled into a flat expanse of train tracks and

stacked cargo trailers. With a screech of protest, the train ground to a halt.

“What town is this?” said Facundo.

“I have no idea.”

They waited. A relentless sun beat down, causing sweat to run down the back of Miranda’s neck. Shading her eyes, she wished she had brought a hat.

Miranda flinched when a low rumble gave notice of something approaching from their rear. A short train, only four boxcars, with an engine pushing the cars toward them. It slowed as it drew near. With a loud bang, the lead car knocked into the rear of their train and the couplings locked into place. A man emerged from a nearby shack and ambled over. He waited while the engine reversed direction to stretch the couplings. Once satisfied they would hold, he stepped in and connected the air hoses. He waved an arm when finished, and the engine chugged away from them.

Miranda’s heart leaped into her throat when she saw three uniformed police officers striding toward the train. They fanned out as they approached, each one heading to a different car. One of them aimed straight for her. Unsmiling, the men plodded toward the train like automatons. Pistols loomed large in the holsters at their waists. Would she have time to scramble down the other side of the boxcar if they decided to use them? She nudged Facundo’s arm, but he had already seen the men. “Whatever you do, don’t get off,” he said.

One officer cupped his hands and shouted. “Okay, folks, let’s go.”

His colleagues each scaled a ladder. The face of the man on Miranda’s car rose into view. “You can’t ride up here,” he said. “It’s dangerous.” His hard tone and cold eyes gave no hint of concern for their safety.

No one moved. The man waved his arm. “You have to get off. Now.”

A loud shout from the next car drew Miranda's attention. The police officer there pulled himself onto the roof and placed his hands on his hips. A shirtless man stood to confront him. "It's against the law to ride up here," the officer said. "You must leave."

"Fuck off."

"What did you say?"

"I think you heard me. We're not getting off."

The officer put a hand on his sidearm. "I mean it. You can't stay here."

Two other men stood. One of them said, "Just leave us alone."

The officer slipped his gun out of its holster. The shirtless man produced a gun of his own and pointed it at him. "I will blow your fucking head off."

They glared at each other for several tense seconds. The cop blinked first. "You're crazy. This isn't safe."

"What the hell do you care?"

The cop holstered his weapon. Mumbling and shaking his head, he descended the ladder and marched away from the train.

Miranda looked over at the police officer on her car. "We can't go back," she said. "They'll kill us."

He spat and said, "Whatever" before dropping out of sight.

The car jumped and Miranda flung out an arm to keep from falling over. Wheels rumbling, the train rolled out of the freight yard, picking up speed as the buildings thinned in favor of corn fields. Miranda made herself as comfortable as possible and tried to forget the police officers. Would there be more?

"I wish I had brought a book," said Facundo.

How could he think of books? Why wasn't he frightened like her? She dropped her head. "Shut up."

"You don't have to be rude."

“We’re on top of a fucking train.”

He stared hard at her for a moment before looking away.

He hadn’t deserved that. Still, did he have to be so damn calm? She nudged his foot. “Hey, I do have one.”

“Don’t trouble yourself.”

She fished it out of her backpack, a tattered paperback depicting a beautiful woman in a blouse that sagged perilously close to her nipples. Behind the woman were two men, one strikingly handsome but dressed in the clothes of a beggar, the other outfitted in finery, but glaring at the reader with the eyes of a tyrant. *El Corazón de Victoria*. Victoria’s Heart. Why had she grabbed this of all things on the way out of the house? Stepped around the body of her father to snatch it from an end table, trying to ignore the bullet holes stitched across his chest. Beside him, her mother, a neat hole in her forehead, her eyes still wide with surprise. And her brother, dear, sweet Ramón, with whom she had played hide and seek and hunted Easter eggs. His decapitated corpse unrecognizable save for his favorite Denver Broncos T-shirt. His head, propped up on the coffee table between two bottles, glassy eyes staring into oblivion. How was this stupid book supposed to replace them?

She held out the book. “Here, take it.” When he hesitated, she said, “Come on, I’m sorry I snapped.”

He accepted it, glanced at the cover, and flipped it over to read the back. As if confirming its worthlessness, he handed it back and said, “Thanks, but I’m not that desperate.”

As Miranda returned the book to her pack, she noticed Luz watching her. The child had stopped crying but, like Miranda, remained tense, her body rigid as she leaned against her mother. Miranda found a bag of dried apricots in her backpack and opened it. She held one out to the girl. “Are you hungry?”

Luz said nothing, just stared with doe eyes.

Miranda popped the fruit into her mouth and chewed. "It's good." She brought out another.

Luz stretched out a hand to take it. Biting into it, she allowed herself a quick smile before slipping back into a gloomy stare. A moment later, her eyes brightened, and she slipped a hand into a pocket. From it, she produced a piece of unwrapped hard candy, which she held out for Miranda.

Miranda said, "That's okay, you should keep it."

The girl whimpered and held the candy even closer. Miranda took it from her. "Thank you." She stowed it in a pants pocket. "I'll save it for later."

Mateo pointed at the apricots. "May I have one?"

Miranda handed the bag to Pilar. "Here."

"Thank you."

As Pilar doled out the apricots, she said, "Have you ever been to the United States?"

Miranda nodded. "I used to live there." Noticing the puzzled expression on Pilar's face, she added, "We had to leave."

"Why?"

"Bad things happen there, too."

"Like what?"

Miranda ignored the question.

"What was it like?"

Miranda allowed her mind to drift back to her childhood. Watermelon in the backyard. The swing set her parents gave her for her birthday. Soccer games at the park. "Mostly it was nice. Then someone burned my father's shop. He was a mechanic."

"That's terrible. Did they catch the person who did it?"

Miranda knew who had done it. Everybody did. After all, the man bragged about it in a photo he posted on Facebook. But no one cared. Not the police detective, who asked only a few listless questions before snapping his notepad closed and stalking off. Nor the insurance investigator, who cited a hitherto unknown clause in her father's policy as he explained the denial of his claim. Certainly not their neighbors, who feared the same might happen to them.

“No, they never caught him.”

The train lurched into a turn, causing Pilar to drop the apricots. The bag skidded away, just out of her reach. Mateo made a move for it, but Pilar caught him and said, “No.” Bouncing with the roof's vibrations, the bag slid closer and closer to the roof edge before slipping over the side.

Facundo leaned in and said, “We don't have a lot of food, you know.”

The train lurched again, this time hard enough that Miranda had to place a hand on the roof to steady herself. Luz shrieked and buried her face against her mother. Miranda felt her center of gravity shifting so that she had to lean forward to stay upright. Glancing toward the engine, she saw the train sloping upwards and understood what was happening. They were entering the mountains.

DARKNESS FELL, AND MIRANDA found herself gripping the roof's spine so hard her fingers ached. She could feel the change in pitch as the train began yet another ascent. She had dreaded this part of the trip for hours. Would she rather experience the fear of staring into a thousand-foot drop or the anxiety of knowing it was there but being unable to see it?

Displaying his usual annoying calm, Facundo lay on his back and watched the stars. Luz and Mateo dozed beside their mother. Pilar sat erect, her eyes searching the dark as if looking for a means of escape. "Only a few hours to go," Miranda said, as much for herself as for Pilar.

Pilar leaned in so she wouldn't have to shout over the wind, "Tell me about America."

Would this woman ever stop talking? "What do you want to know?"

"What was it like to live there?"

America. It had once been home. And, while life there had been good, it hadn't been perfect. Miranda dug through her memories, discarding those she knew Pilar wouldn't want to hear about. Especially those related to American society's undercurrent of racism, best

illustrated by the boy who had asked her to the Valentine's dance only to back out when his father objected to her family's ethnicity.

But there had been good to offset the bad. Miss Tucker, fresh out of school, who had consoled her and wiped her tears on Miranda's first day of kindergarten. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, whose house her mother cleaned. They had given Miranda and Ramon bicycles one Christmas. Camila, her best friend.

"You will love it there," she said. "We had a house. My parents had jobs. I went to a good school."

"It's too bad you had to leave."

An image of orange flames engulfing her father's shop flashed through Miranda's mind. "Yes, it is."

Miranda had always wanted to visit Mexico City. Stroll the Zócalo, climb the massive pyramids of Teotihuacan, wander the grounds of Chapultepec Park. Maybe have dinner at a fancy restaurant before taking in a show at the Palace of Fine Arts. That she would fulfill her wish as a refugee instead of a tourist came as a bitter pill to swallow.

By her reckoning, they had at least another three hours to go. She and Facundo would then abandon this train for one heading north to Juárez. If they could find the right train, that is. There would be no ticket agent to help them.

From Juárez to Albuquerque was another three hundred miles. Because there would be no freight train to hop, they would need some other mode of transportation. And, of course, there was a border to cross. A border that had become almost impenetrable thanks to rising American xenophobia. Miranda had grown up in the United States. That should count for something, she told herself, but knew that it wouldn't. But Facundo had a cousin who told him about a secret tunnel. Was it safe? What if it was run by a drug cartel?

Pilar had fallen asleep an hour ago. Her children snuggled against her, the boy against his mother's body, the girl against his. Should she wake her? Wasn't it dangerous to fall asleep? But plenty of other people, Facundo included, now dozed atop the train. The boxcar's roof had to be at least 10 feet wide. Surely that provided enough of a safety margin against rolling off.

Miranda had intended to stay awake until they reached Mexico City, but now her eyelids sagged with a heaviness she could no longer resist. She lay down with her back against the roof's spine and her backpack wedged against her abdomen. Laying her head on an arm, she knew she would wake up with a sore shoulder. The urge for sleep outweighed the thought, though, and soon she drifted off.

She awoke to a loud scream, an anguished cry that she first thought was part of a dream. But she opened her eyes, and the noise continued. She jerked upright in search of its source. Pilar. Hands clutching her cheeks, terror emblazoned on her face, spittle dripping from her chin.

"What's wrong?" Miranda asked, her heart pounding.

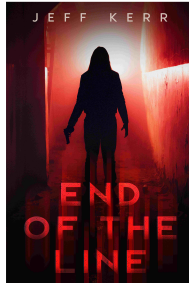
Pilar stared past her as if she was invisible. "Luz." She clutched Mateo to her chest so tightly that Miranda feared she would choke the boy. But Luz was gone. "Luz!" Pilar shrieked. "*Luz!*"

Like everyone else on the train, Miranda had suffered great loss. She had experienced its raw pain, felt it pierce her heart, stumbled through the void it left behind. But in Pilar, Miranda witnessed a new phenomenon. She couldn't name it. She couldn't even imagine it. But there it was, a wicked beast with claws sharp enough to shred Pilar's soul. And the insatiable beast had swallowed Pilar, had swallowed Luz, had swallowed them all. Devoured them and bound them in chains for a hellish journey on the Train of the Unknowns. On the Beast. On the nightmarish ride that had lived up to its name: the Death Train.

Thank you...

FOR READING *DEATH TRAIN*, a prequel to my upcoming thriller *Refuge*.

You might also enjoy *End of the Line*, which follows Miranda and Facundo's after their arrival in Ciudad Juárez.



To keep up with new blog posts, promotions, and my latest work, visit www.jeffreykerrauthor.com.

Watch for *Refuge* in 2023!

About Jeff Kerr

I am an author in Austin, Texas. I began writing some twenty-odd years ago and don't plan on stopping anytime soon. When not working on the next story, I can be found floating a river or battling cedar on my small slice of Texas Hill Country land.

Drop me a line at jeffkerr@jeffreykerrauthor.com. I'll write back!

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/jkerr50>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/jkerr50/>

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